

Vygotsky in Iran: A Personal Account

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Vygotsky has been introduced in Iran since 1985 following the translation and publication of his book *Thought and Language* (1962). This book has been treated as an important classic in Persian academic circles and has been evaluated as an influential source of research and theoretical formulation in the area of developmental as well as cognitive psychology. The author describes his experience of getting to know the ideas of Vygotsky and the process of translation of his work as a personal story and an account of international collaboration. Broad social, cultural and historical contexts of work of Vygotsky as well as outstanding Western psychologists, such as Donald Hebb, are considered. An overview of development of Vygotsky's ideas about concept formation, zone of proximal development, meaning and sense, and inner speech in Persian dissertations and research projects is presented. The author concludes that vygotskian psychology is rather a process than an end-product and outlines the perspectives of its development in Iran.

Key words: Bruner, Hebb, Language, Luria, Thought, Vygotsky.

Vygotsky was introduced in Iran by translation of English version of his book *Thought and Language* (1962) into Persian. The original Russian text was first published in 1934, shortly after Vygotsky's death at the age of 37. But it was suppressed in 1936 not to reappear again in 1956. Its first publication in English was in 1962. The editors – translators for this book were Professor Eugenia Hanfmann of Brandies University and Gertrude Vakar, who was formerly associated with the Russian Research Center, Harvard University, and the Center for International Studies, MIT. The translators provided an abridged version of the original, eliminating «excessive repetition and certain polemical discussions that would be of little interest to the contemporary reader... in favor of more straightforward exposition» (Vygotsky, 1962). Although the abridged version has been considered as incomplete, obscuring the full power of the original, the translation was blessed by two circumstances. First, the lead translator Eugenia Hanfmann, was the daughter of a Russian emigre who had studied in Germany with Kurt Lewin, and for whom Vygotsky was more than a myth of the past. Second, Jerome Bruner, a leader in substantiating the cognitive revolution in the US wrote the preface (Cole, 1990). Bruner in his informative introduction to this volume writes, «The present volume ... ties together one major phase of Vygotsky's work, and though its principal theme is the relation of thought and language, it is more deeply a presentation of a highly original and thoughtful theory of intellectual development».

In *Thought and Language* as one of the best representatives of Vygotsky's works, one can find many ideas and explanations from psychology, history, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology and other disciplines woven together to present a systematic multi-disciplinary approach to mind (Wertsch, 1987, p. 932). He builds his analysis of mind and cognitive processes on the study of the interrelation of thought and language. The unit of analysis for him is word meaning which undergoes many changes in different stages of development. Speech is Vygotsky argues, social in origins. It is learned from others (e. g. par-

ents) at first, to reflect mostly affective and social world of the child. But in the course of growth and in the process of communication with others a «mediated» function of speech emerges which in time it comes to have self-directive properties that eventually result in internalized verbal thought. Vygotsky explains that «The relation between thought to word is a living process; thought is born through words. A word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in word is a shadow.» (p. 153).

As a graduate student of psychology in Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in the USA (1971–1976), I came across *Thought and Language* (English version) in the Peabody bookstore. It had been ordered as a textbook or a reference book for a course on language development. It was a thin, small book and I thought that I can read it easily. I bought the book and started reading it. Interestingly, I found it very provocative, providing me as a reader with an «internal dialogue or rationale» that made Vygotsky's arguments, at first glance, very clear and lucid. When I went further, however, I realized that he is not as easy and simple as appears to be. As a matter of fact, he was trying to combine different ideas from different theorists for the purpose of proving not only a new understanding but a new methodology in the area of developmental psychology and even of total psychology, as well. I knew Piaget and some other developmental psychologists, but Vygotsky was totally new for me. My major area was developmental with an emphasis on psychopathology and clinical work. The publication of this book coincided with the first stirrings of the «cognitive revolution» and an upsurge of cognitive orientations in behavior analysis in the US. At that time cognitive psychology and neuropsychology were emerging as promising and encouraging fields which impressed almost all students of psychology- including me- interested in cognition on the one hand and brain, on the other.

Ironically, the semester that I came across Vygotsky's book I was taking a course on advanced general psychology under the late Professor Hardy Wilcoxon, an excellent mentor and experimental psychologist. The textbook he introduced was Donald Hebb's *Textbook of Psychology* (3rd ed., 1972). It was a wonderful book written very clearly with emphasis on basic concepts and terminologies in psychology. Later I learned that the book was a representation of Hebb's ideas and hypotheses developed early in 1930s and 1940s, and constituted his main approach to psychology as a science. Hebb had made it clear that «If psychology is a science, it should be presented as a science. «This book was not just a textbook, but as Hebb had insisted in the preface of its first edition (1958), provided a critical understanding about psychology.

It was interesting that Vygotsky was also concerned with the idea of reformulating psychology according to a new atmosphere which had been created by 1917 Soviet Revolution. But these two men – Vygotsky and Hebb – lived in two completely different situations. As Luria (1979) describes many American and European psychologists spent their lives in a comparatively quiet environment and their work as scholars consisted of doing research and sometimes moving from university to university (p. 17). But situation in post-revolutionary period of Russia was something else. Luria continues «The general excitement, which stimulated incredible levels of activity, was not at all conducive, however, to systematic, highly organized scientific inquiry» (p. 19).

There were three major groups of psychologists when Vygotsky began his work in the early 1920: 1) a group led by Chelpanov a mentalistic philosopher and logician who taught psychology and continued the traditional approach to psychology- this group was not very influential; 2) a larger group lead by Pavlov and Bekhterev who were against any mentalistic interpretation of human behavior and defined psychology as a science of behavior, reflexes, or reaction; and 3) a group led by Kornilov who had been appointed as a head of Moscow Institute of Psychology after removal of Chelpanov. Kornilov was looking for a synthesis of these two perspectives, although his «reactology» was naive and mechanistic, it seemed to offer an alternative to Chelpanov's openly idealistic psychology (Luria, 1979, p. 30). Rejecting all three of these positions, Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev's («troika») shared assumptions was that neither the subjective psychology of Chelpanov nor the oversimplified psychology based on reflex or reaction would lead to a satisfactory model of human psychology. Vygotsky argued that these perspectives had retained the conceptual isolation of mind and behavior. He insisted that previously we had mind without behavior, now we have behavior without mind. In both cases we have «mind» and «behavior» understood as two distinct and separate phenomena. Therefore, he developed a psychology which would overcome the conceptual isolation of behavior, mind and consciousness. This aspect of Vygotsky's work was very similar to Hebb's efforts to return back the concept of mind, which had been removed by Watson, Skinner and Tolman, to the realm of behavioristic psychology. In his article «What psychology is about», Hebb (1974) answers to the question by saying that «psychology is about the mind» – the same answer that Lashley, his mentor, would have been willing to give for such a question. Mind was regarded as «capacity for thought», and thought

was «the integrative activity of the brain» (Hebb, 1974, p. 75). While both of them, Vygotsky and Hebb, believed in the study of mind and thinking as the proper subject of scientific psychology, their approaches were different. Hebb's approach was biological and he started to work as an experimental psychologist in a laboratory setting. Vygotsky's approach, on the other hand, was cultural- historical. But both of them accepted the evolutionary aspect of human being and were talking about man as a *social animal* with different emphasis: social animal versus social *animal* according to Vygotsky and Hebb, respectively.

This aspect of their work was enough for me to look at them as complementary and I decided to learn both of them as thoroughly as possible. To learn about Hebb I asked my mentor Hardy to explain more on his theory of cell- assembly and phase sequence. But I did not have any direct way to learn about Vygotsky. I waited until my return to my country. Later I came up with more similarities about these two in terms of the concept of «mediation» and some other cognitive processes and I discussed the matter in some papers and my presentations. I am working on another project dealing with the contributions of Hebb and Vygotsky to the development of cognitive science. But now let me return to Vygotsky.

When I arrived in Iran (1976), I started to translate *Thought and Language* into Persian. I thought that our academic circles needed such a classic because it could continue to provide new insights into complex issues about development as well as the inter-relations of thought and language. It did not take much time, however, to realize that I needed to go beyond the text and review the works of people Vygotsky has described and/or criticized, people such as Jean Piaget, William Stern, Karl Buhler, Gestalt psychologists as well as some other figures such as Humboldt, Sapir, Whorf, Bakhtin, Potebnia, and many others. It was in this process that I came up with a new idea about Vygotsky. I noticed that I was not dealing with an ordinary writer or scholar. I am dealing with someone who is expert in different areas of knowledge including psychology, art, literature and history. Although there were not many direct references to the works of Sechenov, Pavlov and Bekhterev, the basic assumptions and the physiological bases of behavior and thinking on the one hand, and the mechanism of learning and conditioning on the other, were evident in his analysis and explanations. But in all the cases his originality was the salient aspect of his analysis without denying the role of other thinkers and scientists in the long history of scientific knowledge.

Vygotsky's main contribution as reflected in the book, however, was not just his vast and profound knowledge in different areas, but his methodic and systematic approach to the formulation and analysis of complicated and many-sided problems. Luria (1979) refers to this point by asserting that,

It is no exaggeration to say that Vygotsky was a genius. Through more than five decades in science I never again met a person who approached his clearness of mind, his ability to lay bare the essential structure of complex problems... (p. 38).

It took about 2 years the translation of the book which was only 168 pages and eventually it was published in 1985. The edition contained 241 pages including some notes about psychologists that Vygotsky had referred to them, a detailed introduction about Vygotsky as a psychologist and as a man, and the terminologies. Since this was the first time to introduce Vygotsky in Iran, translation of the technical concepts into Persian was a very difficult task as I had to coin new terms in our language. Fortunately, the translation was well-received in the academic circles and was introduced as a reference book for the graduate students. Its second and third prints came out 1991 and 2001, respectively. Its fourth print is in press now. Although there were two other Persian translations of the book, it was evaluated as a genuine and lucid translation. The publication of this book can be regarded as a starting point which created a translation movement regarding Vygotsky and Luria's works (Some of the translations by the author are shown in Appendix).

Since the translation and publication of Persian version of *Thought and Language*, many students have started to work on Vygotsky's ideas about concept formation, zone of proximal development, meaning and sense, and inner speech as their dissertations and research projects. Subsequently, Vygotsky became a famous and an influential figure in the departments of psychology, linguistics, education and cognitive sciences. Based on his distinction between «sense» (or connotational meaning) and «meaning» (or denotational meaning), I have proposed a model called meta-sign formulation for metaphor and metaphoric processing (Ghassemzadeh, 1999). In another article I have analyzed the concepts of culture and signification in the framework of Vygotsky's mediational psychology (Ghassemzadeh, 2005). I was not the only person, Professor Azabdaftari from the University of Tabriz, and Professor Khanzadeh from the University of Tehran and other scholars were very influential in this process. They may have their own stories, as well.

In the years following the initial English translation of *Thought and Language* two other translations were published. In 1986, Alex Kozulin emigre from Moscow with first hand knowledge of Vygotsky, created a new translation in which

he added some 100 pages of text to the 1962 edition. As Wertsch (1987) has indicated this new version was superior to the 1962 edition, containing about two third of the material in the original Russian work and easy to understand and very readable. Apparently Kozulin had omitted many of the redundancies on the one hand, and had added some points for clarification throughout the book on the other. The other translation has been published in the first volume of Vygotsky's Collected Works (1987). Norris Minick has done this translation. Its obvious superiority is its completeness. Minick's involvement in this translation goes back to the year that he spent in Moscow to study Vygotsky with psychologists who consider themselves the followers of Vygotsky.

I have started a project to translate the complete edition of *Thought and Language*. My main references are MIT edition (1962), Kozulin's translation (1986) and Minick's text (1987). Meanwhile an Iranian PhD student who is studying clinical and health psychology in Moscow has sent me a complete version of *Thought and Language* in Russian (*Myshlenie i rech*, 2008). We agreed on a collaborative work. She will check my translation against Russian text. We hope to prepare an accurate, complete text of Vygotsky's book in the next 2 years.

My last point concerns about Vygotsky as an evolving process. I think we can take Vygotsky himself as topic or a subject of processing. We can study Vygotsky at two levels: 1) Vygotsky as an end-product; and 2) Vygotsky as a process. As Yaroshevsky and Gurgenidze (1997) have rightly indicated, «We cannot understand Vygotsky's psychological conception disregarding its evolution.» (p. 368). They continue «In literature on Vygotsky one often encounters an inadequate assessment of his theoretical position. The source of this inadequacy is hidden, particularly, in the fact that the evolution in Vygotsky's position concerning the nature of the mental is ignored and that ideas from different periods of his creative career are heaped together.» (p. 368). Although there are so many publications about Vygotsky's ideas from different periods of his creative career, an adequate assessment of his theoretical position in a developmental process of his life is a necessary task.

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Appendix

Works by Vygotsky or about Vygotsky

1. *Thought and Language*, 1962.
2. *Vygotsky's Psychology* by A. Kozulin, 1999.

Works by Luria:

1. *The Making of Mind*, 1979.

7. Luria A. R. The making of mind – A personal account of Soviet psychology. Cambridge, 1979.

8. *Vygotsky L. S. Thought and Language* (Translated by E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar). Cambridge, 1962.

9. *Vygotsky L. S. Thinking and speech* (translated by N. J. Minick) // The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky (Vol. 1). N. Y., 1987.

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2. *Language and Cognition*, 1982.

3. *Cognitive Development*, 1976.

4. *The Man with a Shattered World*, 1975 (translated by H. G. and R. Mojtabai).

5. *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, 2002 (translated by H. G. and R. Mojtabai).